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ABSTRACT

In an average classroom period, a teacher has twenty or more opportunities to interact with students and thereby influence learning outcomes. As such, teachers should use these opportunities to reinforce instruction or give positive corrective feedback. Typical methods used in schools emphasize error correction at the expense of calling attention to the information students have already mastered. Instead, teachers should acknowledge what students already know, build upon it, and then reteach poorly understood material by guiding the student through an analysis of mistakes. Teachers often dismiss a student's incorrect response because they are concentrating what to say next. Teachers then lose a valuable opportunity to interact with students. A good way to avoid this may be for the teacher to plan beforehand some responses to students. Examples of responses which can be used when a correct answer is given include: "Good"; "Thank you"; "Yes, that's it"; "Keep working on it"; "You are getting much better"; "I knew you could do it"; and "Terrific." An example of a response which can be used when an incorrect answer is given is: "Let's look at this...Nice work with this first part, now let's start from here." (JW)

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Twenty Golden Opportunities to Enhance Student Learning: Use Them or Lose Them

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BARRY SPONDER

Introduction

In the fairy tale about the farmer, the goose and the golden eggs, the ungrateful farmer becomes impatient with only one golden egg a day and eventually kills the poor goose to get all the gold. Unfortunately, this rash action has the opposite effect and the farmer's family (and we) sadly learn not to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. *Don't be impatient, don't be greedy and don't waste golden opportunities by failing to recognize them!* This tale can also serve as a reminder for teachers who repeatedly lose *golden eggs* (opportunities) during almost every lesson they teach. The major difference between the farmer and the teacher is that while the farmer never gets another chance the teacher keeps trying to kill the goose over and over again.

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Teachers should remember the moral of the fairy tale whenever they give students feedback about their performance. By expecting only *the correct answer* to their questions, and by impatiently dismissing incorrect responses, teachers often fail to capitalize on many marvelous opportunities for enriching students' understanding of complex procedures and concepts. Every student response to a learning stimulus is a *golden opportunity* to reinforce instruction or to give positive corrective feedback. Unfortunately, teachers often fail to appreciate this precious treasure; instead they ignore, trivialize or kill the source of students' learning and self-worth (the golden goose), namely, their **motivation** to participate in an educational environment.

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A recent search of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database turned up over 1000 articles describing the use of positive reinforcement and corrective feedback in the classroom. Unfortunately, it is often easier to talk about effective teaching practices than to use them in the classroom. Since research in educational psychology generally confirms the benefits of positive reinforcement over punishment, negative reinforcement, or no reinforcement at all, it benefits teachers to take the time to examine *the way they respond to students* (Biechler & Snowman, 1990). *During an average thirty minute class period a teacher will have twenty or more opportunities to interact with students and to reinforce learning outcomes.* These *golden eggs* appear during question and answer sessions, while making instructional presentations or when working with individual students. They emerge, in fact, almost every time a student responds to a teacher.

If teachers insist upon receiving only the anticipated correct answer then they are losing their best chance to help students bridge the gap between what they know and what they are trying to learn. Moreover, a lack of positive feedback can cause many students to quietly lose much of their motivation and self-confidence, especially those who are characterized as underachievers. In short, *teachers must seize upon these twenty golden opportunities for positive reinforecement and constructive feedback in every class period or risk killing a gaggle of geese that lay golden eggs.*

Always Build On the Positive

Teachers usually spend a lot of time explaining concepts and procedures to students and then providing remedial or individualized instruction for those who are slower to catch on. For many, teaching involves *The Universal Helping Interaction* (Jones, 1987), which assumes "that when students are stuck you explain to them what they do not understand and then help them to do it right" (p. 23). Consequently, if a student fails to grasp an operation such as the division of two digit numbers the teacher focuses on the student's difficulty by *calling attention to his or her mistakes, reteaching the appropriate procedures and then providing additional problems to check for understanding.*

Unfortunately, this *Universal Helping Interaction* tends to emphasize error correction, often at the expense of reinforcing the information that students have already mastered. "We make the error, and the failure experience it represents, the best-remembered portion of the effort (p. 48)." *The golden opportunity here is to acknowledge, and build upon, what students already know instead of focusing on their mistakes. Then, reteach the poorly understood operation by showing them how to proceed.* After all, understanding "is not an all-or nothing affair; rather it varies in degree and is probably never complete (Nickerson, 1985 p. 235)." Hence, students are given credit for at least understanding something, corrective feedback for what they don't understand, and directions on how to progress. Not only does this approach save classroom time, it helps to motivate students to take risks and not be afraid of failure.

Golden Eggs

Many chances for giving students positive reinforcement and successful corrective feedback transpire quickly and can be lost unless teachers learn to anticipate these opportunities. Question and answer sessions can be particularly useful if teachers pay attention to good principles of inquiry (Dillon, 1988; Sponder, 1993). The following dialogue and the suggested improvement illustrate *the golden egg-hunting process.*

Teacher : Remember, one meter is made up of one hundred centimeters. Yes student?

Student : It is also one thousand millimeters

Teacher : I haven't taught that to you yet. Wait until tomorrow! Don't bring these things up before we cover them in class.

An Alternative:

Teacher : Remember, one meter is made up of one hundred centimeters. Yes student?

Student : It is also one thousand millimeters

Teacher : Good. We will work with millimeters tomorrow. You really know this metric system and I am glad that you made that connection.

A summary of some of these *golden eggs* are summarized in Table 1. as follows:

Table 1. Some possibilities for giving positive corrective feedback and positive reinforcement to students during a lesson.

Golden Opportunity	Teacher's response slowly kills the goose	Teacher's response gets the golden egg
• **Teacher:** How many centimeters in one meter? **Student:** One hundred.	**Teacher:** Next	**Teacher:** Good. Next question
• **Teacher:** How many centimeters in one meter? **Student:** Ten?	**Teacher:** Wrong. Next student	**Teacher:** Okay, let's look at the meter and see what it shows.
• **Teacher:** Who can tell me which planet is closest to the Earth? **Student:** The moon.	**Teacher:** No. Who knows the correct answer?	**Teacher:** Well the moon is in the sky and I'm glad you remembered it. Let's look at this model of the solar system again and we can see which objects move or revolve around the sun and which bodies only revolve around planets...
• **Student:** (on the board) Two hundred and fifty five divided by twelve is twenty seven	**Teacher:** Incorrect. You made a mistake with that second digit and you didn't borrow. or **Teacher:** Incorrect. Who can help and show him/her how to do it?	**Teacher:** Let's look at this... Nice work with this first part. Now let's start from here.

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Table 1. Continued

Golden Opportunity	Teacher's response slowly kills the goose	Teacher's response gets the golden egg
Teacher: Remember, one meter is made up of one hundred centimeters. Yes student? **Student:** It is also one thousand millimeters	**Teacher:** Well, we haven't covered that yet. or **Teacher:** I haven't taught that to you yet.	**Teacher:** Good. We will work with that tomorrow. You really know this metric system.
• **Teacher:** Can you tell me which way is west? **Student:** I'm not sure	**Teacher:** Sit down! Who knows the answer?	**Teacher:** Okay, now remember in which direction does the sun rise? **Student:** East? **Teacher:** Good, point to the east. (Student does.) Yes. Now remember that west is in the *opposite* direction. Can you point to the west? (Student does.) I knew you could do it.

Twenty-Five Ways to say "Good"

When students answer a question thoughtfully, correctly and in a way that moves the lesson forward there is nothing more satisfying than to receive their teacher's acknowledgement. This feedback lets them know they are peforming well and it can increase their motivation to learn and their desire to perform. Teachers often fail to appreciate a student's response because they are already thinking about what they want to say next. They can change this behaviour by preparing responses in advance and using them at the appropriate moments. This is not to suggest that praise be indiscriminately used for everything that students do since research clearly indicates that unless students perceive that praise is earned, it may be counterproductive (Weiner, 1986). Below is a list of twenty-five ways to communicate the idea that a student has done *good work*. The reader is challenged to come up with additional possibilities.

1. Good
2. Thank you
3. Yes, that's it
4. I like that answer
5. Quite good
6. That's it!
7. That's right
8. Yes
9. Good work
10. You are learning fast
11. Keep working on it, you are getting much better
12. Exactly right
13. You're doing a good job
14. I knew you could do it
15. That's the way to do it
16. Terrific
17. Good remembering
18. Nice work
19. I like the way you did that
20. Great answer
21. Good thinking
22. That is a very good answer
23. Outstanding
24. Nice answer
25. I like the way you said that

Summary

The fairy tale about killing the golden goose underscores the importance of attitudinal change. If the farmer had patience, eschewed greed and recognized his good fortune he would have been wealthy and successful. Teachers can also learn from this parable by patiently considering a student's answer, acknowledging their good efforts and by recognizing that even an errant response contains something to build upon for corrective feedback. Unlike the farmer, teachers have many chances every day to kill the golden goose of student motivation. However, they can also collect golden eggs by giving students positive corrective feedback and by learning to say *good work* in many different ways. Teachers should learn to use the twenty golden opportunities they have in each lesson or they will lose them.

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